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**JOHN WESLEY 1703-1791:
A BICENTENNIAL TRIBUTE**

by John Walsh

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FOREWORD

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The lecture in 1995 will be given by Dr. M. R. Watts, of the University of Nottingham.

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JOHN WESLEY 1703-1791: A BICENTENNIAL TRIBUTE

Just over two hundred years ago, on March 2 1791, John Wesley died, at the age of 87. He had come close to realizing his determination to work until the end — to wear out and not to rust out. Almost to the last he had continued his disciplined routines, still including Scotland, though no longer Ireland, on his annual itinerary until the year before his death.¹ He still rose at 4 a.m. and until near the end insisted on preaching in the open air, though he now had to be supported on each side by attendants, and his memory had deteriorated, so that his sermons were written on slips of paper which were handed to him when he lapsed.² His deathbed was in the classical evangelical style, lovingly recorded, and attended like the *couchée* of a great monarch. The final exit was more “an apotheosis than a dissolution”.³ During his final hours he had cried out twice “the best of all is God with us”, and tried to repeat Isaac Watts’ great hymn, “I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath”. His last word was “farewell!”. Four days later, his funeral service took place. When the officiating minister came to the words “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God . . . to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother”, he substituted the words “our dear *father*” and the congregation dissolved into tears. Dr. Whitehead preached his funeral sermon on the text “Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?”⁴

There was much else to occupy public attention in 1791, but Wesley’s death was treated as a public event. Rival biographies, authorised and unauthorised, were soon rushed into print. Elegies were composed and obituaries flowed. For the most part judgements were clement. There were still many who regarded him as a dangerous schismatic, an enthusiast, a heresiarch, but the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, once his severe critic, now described him as “one of the most extraordinary characters this or any age ever produced”.⁵ Through longevity, in his final decades Wesley had gained the celebrity status of the Grand Old Man. The years of mobbings and slander were behind him. He was no longer feared as a Jesuit in disguise, as a Jacobite agent, or as a mountebank milking the poor of their pennies and sixpences. In 1750 Bishop Lavington of Exeter had jocularly suggested that he might be administering aphrodisiac drugs to female followers at his Love Feasts: by 1777 he was having dinner with Bishop Lowth of London.⁶

In his last years Wesley was a familiar public figure as he rolled round the country in a chaise fitted out with bookshelves (the gift of a friend), preaching incessantly as he went.⁷ Like Newman, whose career also spanned nearly a century, he had mellowed with age. The severe looking, dark haired, young cleric depicted by John Williams in 1741 had become the benevolent patriarch painted by Romney; his cheeks were still schoolboy pink but his eccentrically long hair was now pure white.⁸ His followers openly compared him to Moses and Abraham. In some parts of the country he had gained the aura of a folk hero. Children were brought to him to be blessed. Legends accreted round him in Cornwall, as around some Celtic holy man, describing his dramatic encounters with ghosts and devils.⁹ Wesley relics were preserved for generations: the trees under which he preached, the beds in which he slept, the tea pot he used, even the asparagus patch which had helped provide him with a meal.¹⁰ His image appeared on Staffordshire pottery and Wedgwood china.

The lineaments of Wesley's achievement were clear enough to his obituarists and early biographers. Their problem was to place his career in an Anglican historical context in which he had no real precedents. In the early years he — like Whitefield — had been often seen as Puritan Dissenter in disguise. "We have heard of field-conventicles in Scotland", wrote Joseph Trapp, disgustedly, in 1739. "We have . . . had something of this nature in England, as practised by Brownists, Anabaptists, Quakers, Ranters or such like. But for a clergyman of the Church of England to pray and preach in the fields, in the country, or in the streets in the city, is perfectly new".¹¹ By the time of Wesley's death, when his system had evolved in its fullness, his memorialists were sometimes driven to the Roman Church to find informative parallels for Wesley and his movement. Macaulay later embroidered this theme in a brilliant passage of his essay on Ranke's *Popes*. Rome, he suggested, would have known just what to do with the early Methodists. It would have made rapid use of Wesley's plebeian preachers. "The ignorant enthusiast of whom the Anglican Church makes an enemy . . . the Catholic Church makes a champion. She bids him nurse his beard, covers him with a gown and hood of coarse dark stuff, ties a rope around his waist and sends him forth to teach in her name. He costs her nothing". So too of the genteel leaders of Methodism: Macaulay suggested that "at Rome, the Countess of Huntingdon would have a place in the calendar as St Selina. . . . Place Ignatius Loyola at Oxford. He is certain to become the head of a formidable secession. Place John Wesley at Rome. He is certain to be the first General of a new Society devoted to the interests and honour of the Church".¹² There is something to be said for this claim. A man of Wesley's type would seem to approximate

fairly easily to one of the models of Roman sanctity, not as a contemplative but as an activist saint. It is noticeable that commentators frequently compared his work with that of Jesuits; with the missionary labours of Francis Xavier and the quasi-military organising genius of Loyola. Wesley had formed what was in part a new preaching order — like that of the Friars — and in part a lay devotional confraternity. His itinerant preaching force embraced that principle of *mobility* which the Roman Church welcomed, but which the Hanoverian Establishment as yet refused to entertain.

Wesley's basic principle was extremely simple. The official devotional system of the Church was to be supplemented by a network of private religious societies; revitalizing cells, which would regenerate the Church from within. But his movement was not merely one of interior restoration: it was also intended as a missionary movement, looking outward to the mass of the unchurched. "Go always not only to those who want [i.e. need] you, but to those that want you most", he told his preachers.¹³ For many clergymen of the decentralised Church of England the parish was their world: in 1739 Wesley had announced aggressively "I look upon all the world as my parish".¹⁴ The Church still possessed massive strength, but it was often the strength of immobility, of stasis, of complacency. Unlike most priests of his High Church background, with their dread of "new modelling", Wesley looked outwards to those beyond the pale of the church, and looked forward as well as backward.

In the pursuit of his objectives, Wesley had revealed organisational skills of the highest rank. He was a good strategist and a brilliant tactician. Though retaining much of his old High Churchman's passion for prescription and order, he was essentially a pragmatist and experimenter. He saw that church order was not an end in itself but ultimately to be assessed according to its utility in promoting Christ's kingdom. "What is the end of all ecclesiastical order?" he asked a critic. "Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God? . . . Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth".¹⁵ What would it profit a man who could have saved souls, to plead at the Judgement Seat, "Lord he was not of my parish?"¹⁶ Believing himself led forward like Moses, step by step along a Providential path, he had adopted a series of highly irregular expedients to promote his mission. He had sanctioned a growing army of itinerant lay preachers, who, like himself, were prepared to preach out of doors, in barns and fields. He had articulated his scattered societies into a "connexion" and divided them into small, intimate subgroupings — classes and bands — whose members met regularly for informal devotion and mutual support. Through its flexibility, its mobility and its capacity to tap reserves of lay enthusiasm and energy, Wesley's

Connexion had proved itself well fitted to gather in some of the myriads of the unchurched; to reach many of the industrial settlements gathered round the new mines, quarries and forges — the Cornish tinners, the colliers of Kingswood and Newcastle. Wesley had a sharp sociological eye for such communities of outlanders and would make a long detour on a journey to take them in. It was not by the communication of religious excitement to huge crowds that Wesley excelled — that was the forte of Whitefield; it was Whitefield whose voice production and gestures were studied enviously by actors, and who (it was said) could make men either laugh or cry by the way he pronounced the word *Mesopotamia*. Wesley was at his best in small groups. As Howell Harris noted, his genius lay in ceaseless dedication to evangelism in “the little places” — in stringing together a multitude of small causes on the thread of an evangelistic and pastoral organisation.¹⁷ “Only connect” might stand as a Wesleyan epitaph: not for nothing was his organization known as a Connexion.

Significantly, none of his expedients — his “prudential helps” — was original. He was a great borrower. Voluntary religious societies, if often rather moribund, already existed in the Church; field preaching was already being practised in Wales by the layman Howell Harris and others from 1736, while Wesley was still a High Churchman in Georgia; he took the Covenant Service from the Puritans, the idea of bands and lovefeasts from the Moravians, and probably copied the idea of holding an annual preachers’ conference from the Calvinistic Methodists. Here, as elsewhere, Wesley’s genius came out less in originality than in the ability to snap up useful ideas and adapt them swiftly to his own purposes.¹⁸

In the execution of his task Wesley showed ascetical self-discipline and an awesome concentration of purpose. He subordinated his life to his mission with a calm intensity which helped to set new standards for moral reformers and philanthropists who followed him. Howard the prison reformer commented after Wesley’s death “I saw in him how much a single man might achieve by zeal and perseverance. And I thought, why may not I do as much in my way as Mr Wesley has done in his?”¹⁹ Wesley possessed natural advantages which made his work physically sustainable. He enjoyed robust health, for though small, he was lean and possessed a muscular strength: Leslie Stephen calls him “a human gamecock”.²⁰ He recovered from two acute fevers that might have killed off other men: in the second his tongue was black, his pulse seemed to have stopped, and his hair dropped out.²¹ In many respects he was a monument to the Protestant ethic, excessively tidy, addicted to work, to the husbandry of resources, never wasting a piece of paper or a cup of water, and near-obsessional about time thrift. After experimentation he cut his sleep down to the minimum to ensure a longer

working day; he even chided his people for wasting time by *singing* too slowly. He did not hang about. "The King's business requires haste" was his maxim. The motto of his Kingswood School was *in via recta celeriter* — in the right way, quickly. Many of his letters have the short, staccato note of army orders about them, like his advice to Christopher Hopper in the autumn of 1763: "Be a Methodist all over. Be exact in everything. Be zealous; be active. Press on to the one thing and carry all before you. How much may be done before the summer is at an end!"²²

Despite a firm acceptance of the idea of Original Sin, Wesley was propelled forward by an essentially cheerful meliorism which was in part a matter of temperament, in part inspired by Enlightenment optimism. His pessimism about the natural man was matched by hopeful expectation about human activity when it was informed by grace. He believed firmly in the need for improvement, telling his people that it was their duty to be "continually learning from . . . experience . . . to do everything you have to do better today than you did yesterday".²³ A good deal of his animus against Calvinism came from his perception that the doctrine of predestination inculcated fatalistic inactivity and "spiritual sloth". The world must be made a better place. Wesley's perception of religion was strongly eudaemonic: it was not God's purpose in creation (as the Calvinist James Hervey maintained) to demonstrate his inscrutable sovereignty, but to "impart happiness to his creatures".²⁴ He strongly disliked religious morbidity; he had no time for "croakers" — pessimists and doom-mongers — or for preachers who indulged in the "profuse throwing about [of] hell and damnation"; he was wary of mystics because he considered them often too world-rejecting, offering their devotees "a gloomy religion instead of the cheerfulness of faith".²⁵ His preachers were warned against "poring too much upon our inbred sin".²⁶ In Wesley's view, the ideal Christian life was one of ceaseless, cheerful activism.

His regimen was Spartan, like that of some clerical General Montgomery. He rose at about four, preaching several times a day, often travelling scores of miles on horseback, dealing promptly with a large correspondence, keeping up as best he could with new publications in theology and natural science, while still finding time to publish a substantial number of works of his own, and to abridge — and often ruthlessly to plagiarize — those of other authors.²⁷ As one obituarist noted enviously, "If we consider the whole of his labours and compare them with what most men of industry have done, we may say that he had lived life three times over".²⁸ The purposeful concentration of energy was achieved at a cost - it was certainly a contributory factor to his spectacularly unsuccessful marriage. Wesley, admitted John Whitehead, was "not only proof against . . . persecution and

reproach, he was also proof against the softer and finer feelings of human nature, when they stood in the way of the great work in which he was engaged . . . Mr Wesley had the resolution to lay aside any subject, whenever the hour came that he was to set out on his journey or was to preach or visit the sick".²⁹ He astonished the convivial Dr Johnson by abruptly rising from his table — after dinner had appeared an hour late — and leaving to get on with his work.³⁰

Though equable and charming in his outward demeanour, Wesley had an iron will: he was, as Vivian Green has put it, "granite in aspic".³¹ Unlike Whitefield, Wesley kept the tightest grip on the management of the scattered movement he had created and did not let it disintegrate. Like most prophets and not a few saints, Wesley had a strong conviction of being in the right. While often professing his sinfulness, he seldom admitted his mistakes. He was continually accused of autocracy and love of power. He was "Pope John".³² In one of his sermons, in a revealing slip of the pen he accuses some of his overdressed followers as trifling "with God and me".³³ At his Conference of preachers, when someone proposed a motion of which he disapproved, he would change the subject adroitly; he would "begin a story, or give out a hymn, and so put an end to the conversation". Those who held out against him, complained John Hampson, "he treated as the mariners treated Jonah, he threw them overboard, or . . . to borrow his phraseology, he 'commended them to God'".³⁴ At the 1774 Conference, one of his preachers noted, "Mr. Wesley seemed to do all the business himself".³⁵ He persisted in regarding Methodism as no more than his own private army; the mere aggregate of those he had permitted as an act of grace to join him, on his own terms.³⁶ This was a view which became rapidly at odds with reality as his movement took on a life of its own.

In 1791 the lineaments of Wesley's organisational achievement and the outward expressions of his character were widely understood. But then as now, those who scrutinized Wesley were often puzzled by the paradoxes of his career and teaching. The discovery of ambiguity in the lives of great men is a familiar stock in trade of the biographer; often this is a mere literary device but in Wesley's case it is unavoidable. Paradox is everywhere. How does an Oxford don, a man obsessively neat and tidy, who devoutly held the maxim that "cleanliness is next to godliness", come to rub shoulders with blackened colliers and Hogarth's street people? Puzzling contradictions persist in Wesley's ideology. Can this political High Tory, who burned rhetorical incense to George II as God's vice-gerent be the same Wesley who planned among his followers a radical return to the "community of goods" of the early Church?³⁷ How did an erstwhile advanced Oxford High

Churchman come, as mere priest, to perform his own eccentric ordinations in 1784?

It is in Wesley's theology that paradox has been most closely observed. The cross-currents of his doctrinal system inspire a steady flow of Ph.D. theses. In scholarly monographs Wesley has been described in connection with Anglicanism — including its Anglo-Catholic and Broad Church schools — to Calvinism, Lutheranism, Puritanism, and Roman Catholicism. In the 5000 items listed in a recent American bibliography of publications devoted to Wesley, one can find him discussed in relation to teetotalism, pacifism, vegetarianism and homosexuality. He has been compared to St. Francis, St. John of the Cross, Tolstoy and Tillich. One recent study has been prudently entitled "Wesley: a man for all seasons".³⁸

This is not surprising, for he was a man continually open to fresh ideas and experiences, trying to combine and harmonize what he had learned. In his receptive, eclectic, mind diverse spiritual currents converged. He was the grandson of two well-known ejected Puritan ministers, but in his childhood at Epworth Rectory he had been steeped in advanced High Churchmanship, and at Oxford he had developed a devotion to the Primitive Church and the ante-Nicene Fathers which never left him. Through his encounter with the Moravian Brethren, en route for Georgia, his rubrical High Churchmanship had been cross-fertilised by the heart-religion of the Germans. Through a command of modern as well as ancient languages he was able to break out of the spiritual insularity which was fast overtaking the Church of England. On learning German, he translated into English some of the great German Lutheran hymns which we now sing. It was on Bengel, the great Lutheran expositor, that he drew heavily for his own *Notes on the New Testament*. His French, Spanish and Italian gave him a degree of insight into Continental Roman spirituality, including that of mystics like Bourignon and Guyon.³⁹ The suspicion that he was a Jesuit in disguise was increased by his publication of the lives of several modern Roman saints whom he considered exemplars of inward religion — notably Gregory Lopez, a Latin American hermit, and Gaston de Renty, an aristocratic French *dévot* of the mid 17th century.⁴⁰ Some indication of Wesley's adherence to what he called "the Catholic spirit" can be gained from a glance at his *Christian Library*, a Reader's Digest of spirituality which he prepared for his followers. There, cheek by jowl, lie early Fathers together with Puritans and Cambridge Platonists, Pascal the Jansenist and Molinos the Jesuit, John Bunyan and Bishop Ken, Tillotson and Juan d' Avila.⁴¹ Wesley is a Janus-like figure, looking both backwards and forwards: in an exhortation to the less learned of his fellow clergy he urged

them to improve themselves by poring over the ante-Nicene Fathers — but also to get to grips with Isaac Newton's *Principia* and *Theory of Light and Colours*.⁴²

Many of Wesley's Victorian followers did not appear to notice the ambivalence of their founder's teaching. They saw him as an inspired evangelist, simply expounding the Scriptures. That he had been reared a High Anglican was not contested, but his major Methodist interpreters like James Rigg and Luke Tyerman saw this as a transitory phase, largely sloughed off at the famous Aldersgate Street conversion. They divided Wesley's life into two sharply contrasted halves. In his early career, Wesley had indeed been "an intolerant and ritualizing High Churchman", "a Puseyite a hundred years before Dr. Pusey flourished": after 1738, however, he had been abruptly transformed into "a very Low Churchman holding what were virtually presbyterian views".⁴³ This contention commands qualified support from some modern scholars.⁴⁴ That Wesley was essentially an evangelical after 1738 can hardly be doubted. He saw himself restoring some of the neglected "old divinity" of the Reformation. He held a strong doctrine of Original Sin. He believed in the need for repentance and the New Birth; in justification by faith through a grace that was unmerited and free. But there was another side to the medal. Victorian High Anglicans striving to win back errant Methodists to the priestly fold in which their founder had lived and died pointed to dimensions of Wesley's mature faith and practice which were hard to square with the image of Wesley as godfather to the Evangelical Alliance, or as Dwight Moody in a tricorn hat and knee breeches. Were not the Wesley brothers strong sacramentalists, who preached a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, urged "constant" (not merely frequent) communion, viewed the Eucharist as a Sacrifice, and held a theory of a Real Presence in the elements which many Victorian evangelicals would have disavowed? Did not the Wesleys pray for the faithful departed? Did they not hold an Arminian doctrine of justification? Was John Wesley not an ascetic of sorts, who fasted with regularity and published a tract extolling celibacy as a higher state than marriage?⁴⁵

The ambiguities of Wesley's theology provoked different responses. It was possible simply to ignore them. It was also possible to treat his writings as a magpie's nest of ill-assorted and unreconciled elements. The high Calvinist Augustus Toplady complained that Wesley's theology was "a harlequin assemblage", a *bouillabaisse* of discordant ingredients, like the witches' brew in *Macbeth*.⁴⁶ Victorian men of letters regarded Wesley as a travelling evangelist who was far too busy to be a significant theologian. Matthew Arnold, that experienced Inspector of Schools, classified Wesley as having "a mind of the third order": Leslie Stephen dismissed him as a

man “deficient in . . . speculative insight”.⁴⁷ Wesley himself, who spent more time in the saddle than in the study, made no claims to theological profundity. In the preface to his standard sermons he announced “I design plain truth for plain people”.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, from an early period some have treated Wesley as a serious theologian. An early example was Alexander Knox, Irish High Anglican, who had known and admired Wesley in boyhood. Knox saw in Wesley a man who sought to hold the pursuit of spiritual growth and perfection characteristic of Chrysostom together with Augustine’s stress on converting grace.⁴⁹ The Knox interpretation — that Wesley fused a Protestant doctrine of grace on to a Catholic ethic of holiness — has had a long run and commands respect. Wesley believed in justification by faith, through free grace, but he saw justification as only the start of the Christian life whose true end was the progressive restoration of the soul to full health. His primary aim was to spread “scriptural holiness” through the land. Repentance, he said, was the porch of religion, faith was the door, but holiness was religion itself.⁵⁰ There was no limit to growth in grace: we must press on to perfection, pure love of God, “entire sanctification”, towards that state described by Catholic theologians as “purity of intention”. Here, in his much-reviled doctrine of Christian Perfection, Wesley drew on a strain of spirituality running back through Jeremy Taylor and à Kempis to “Macarius the Egyptian” and to the Greek Fathers of the 4th century.⁵¹ As one might imagine, the Knox interpretation of Wesley as synthesiser and harmonizer is highly congenial to some modern interpreters who are dedicated to the Ecumenical idea and concerned to uncover the basic unities which underlie the major Christian traditions. Albert Outler has eloquently interpreted Wesley as a man who, though a “folk theologian”, sought to transcend some of the stark doctrinal disjunctions which have spilled so much ink — and, one might add, blood — since Augsburg and Trent.⁵²

It would be a mistake to see Wesley only in relation to tradition. He was no mere theological atavist but a man alert to many of the cultural currents of his century. In some ways he is a counter-Enlightenment figure, with a sense of the omnipresence of the supernatural that seemed old-fashioned to many contemporaries and some followers. He believed in spiritual immediacy and in the intuitive apprehension of grace. As much as anyone, Wesley helped restore the language of feeling to the spirituality of his age. Yet there was a powerful strain of empiricism in his make-up, which owed not a little to Locke and to Newton. He had the scientific curiosity of some early virtuoso of the Royal Society. He published a short account of the progress of the experimental method from the age of Aristotle to that of

Boyle and wrote a paper on the effect of dew on coach glasses.⁵³ He arranged for violins to be played to the lions at the Tower Zoo, so that he could observe the effects of music on the brute creation.⁵⁴ He made one of the earliest copies of Benjamin Franklin's electricity machine, and used it to give shock treatment to the physically and mentally ill.⁵⁵ In his do-it-yourself medical manual, *Primitive Physic*, he put the word "tried" against the cures which had been tested, some of them on himself.⁵⁶ Experiment played a large part of his theology too. Like some eighteenth century William James or Alister Hardy, he studied religious experiences with clinical interest. He used living experience, as well as inherited tradition, as a vital exegetical tool, altering his interpretation of Scripture in its light.⁵⁷ In the style of a modern Gallup Poll, he issued questionnaires to 652 of his people when he wanted to find out whether the gift of perfect love was granted gradually or instantaneously.⁵⁸ His views on religious perception were set in the framework of an empirical epistemology that drew consciously on the sensationalist psychology of Locke and Peter Browne, adapting it to take account of faith as sensible spiritual experience.⁵⁹

Throughout his life, Wesley tried to interpret his vision of the Christian faith within the parameters of a broad quadrilateral of authorities: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.⁶⁰ How far he succeeded is debatable. Was he a well-meaning but rather clumsy eclectic? Or was he a gifted and original synthesiser? Some close students of his theology see it as marred by unresolved tensions and incongruities. On the other side we have the French historian of Jansenism, Jean Orcibal, who suggested that Wesley was most original when he was most derivative; a theologian whose originality lay in his ability to select, assimilate and reconcile while yet remaining within the confines of a definite system.⁶¹ Whichever view one takes, Wesley should be seen not so much as an *either/or* but as a *both/and* theologian.⁶²

If Wesley can be seen as a mediator between Christian traditions, he can also be seen as a mediator between the worlds of elite and popular religious culture. It would be unwise, I think, to accept too easily E.P. Thompson's aphorism that Wesleyan Methodism was a movement *for* the people but not *of* the people.⁶³ In some ways Wesley was a didactic bourgeois, educating and tidying up the unruly and the feckless poor. In some ways, too, his movement represented an attack on popular culture in its condemnation of many popular recreations and revelries. At the same time, Wesley can be seen as a man working alongside the poor; as a cultural broker, attempting to reconcile the liturgical and the charismatic. This involved a descent into low life which many churchmen saw as puzzling, if not alarming. The good Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, deplored Wesley's attachment to

those whom he regarded as “the rabble”.⁶⁴ Wesley’s mission was not that of the comfortable theorist: it involved him in a close physical contact with Hogarth’s world of dirt, disease, and stench. He must often have caught the lice and fleas of the poor; in 1774 he remarks quite casually that he has contracted the contagion of “the itch” a hundred times by sharing the beds of poor families and shaking their hands.⁶⁵ As a much-mobbed field-preacher he encountered the poor not only as respectful and admiring, but as violent and obscene.

From the outset, Wesley saw his mission as having a particular mission to poor people. In an early programmatic declaration of intent he had told his fellow clergy “the rich, the honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing . . . to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor”.⁶⁶ A primary aim was to bring back into the orbit of the Church of England the piety of poor people, which had not been fully enlisted by the devotional austerity of some Puritans or by the stiff, severely rubrical piety of some post-Restoration High Churchmen, in whom the Commonwealth years had instilled a deep dread of popular “enthusiasm.” Since the Reformation there had been few mediating institutions within the national Church which could engage the emotional, spontaneous piety of poor people on something like its own terms, while yet containing it within the bounds of order and decency. The established Church encouraged the piety of closet prayer and reading, but its ministry offered little in the way of fellowship beyond the formal Sunday services, Matins and Evensong, seasoned with a periodic Eucharist which was often thinly attended by the poor, who saw themselves as unworthy to partake of it. Close Christian fellowship, Wesley perceived, was dangerously ill provided for in Anglican parish life.⁶⁷

He aimed at bridging the gap between elite and popular religious sensibility. Within the fold of the Church he attempted to provide voluntary associations which would allow for comradeship and permit the expression of religious spontaneity. While so doing, he had in full view the interests of the historic, institutional Church. He saw his societies as an evangelical order within a Church whose surrounding environment of catholicity — apostolic order, liturgy, sacramental life — he took largely for granted and assumed to be readily available.⁶⁸ The *ecclesiola* were intended to minister to the *ecclesia*, not to be a substitute for it. His lay preachers were intended as evangelists — they were not priests, or even fully accredited pastors. While he encouraged popular religious “enthusiasm”, he also sought to contain it and direct it towards the pursuit of holiness. It was free grace that the Gospel offered, not cheap grace.

At the same time, he experimented with ways to make the life of the Church more relevant to the needs of simple people. His societies would

replicate on a small scale the neighbourliness of the village communities which many migrant workers had abandoned. In the intimate, small-group mutuality of the class-meeting and the band meeting an opportunity was provided for collective discipleship. The purpose of the class was to help members "bear one another's burdens, and naturally to care for each other."⁶⁹ Extra-liturgical occasions were created to care for felt wants — the Watchnight service, the Covenant service, above all the Love Feast, a revival of the early Christian *Agape*, a kind of democratized folk-eucharist. In striking contrast to contemporary Anglican practice, roles were opened up for the leadership of humble people; they could become preachers, poor stewards, class leaders, trustees, exhorters. Wesley's evangelistic pragmatism encouraged him to widen the space available for women: they were encouraged to speak out in society meetings, to lead classes and bands, to found societies and Sunday Schools. If clearly possessed of an "extraordinary" call, they were permitted to preach.⁷⁰ In Wesley's societies, the humble as well as the genteel could aspire to be saints. In his *Arminian Magazine* one can find obituaries of scores of plebeian saints — weavers, common soldiers, cripples — in contrast to the hagiography of the established Church which, as the Tractarian Tom Mozley later complained, seemed "to show a positive jealousy of the saint 'from the ranks'".⁷¹

Wesley's view of grace made allowance for spiritual immediacy in ways that brought him close to the world of folk religion. Popular "enthusiasm" was engaged and encouraged, even if it was to be canalized by the discipline of the societies. He recognized the characteristics of folk piety — spontaneity, freedom, strong belief in the supernatural and the occult — and made generous allowances for them. Tears, cries, and inspirational utterance were accepted. Hymn-singing gave a controlled, prescriptive vent for emotional fervour. By encouraging the "freedom of the spirit" Wesley made room for orality as well as literacy, and thus engaged the attention of the illiterate, for, as a simple Methodist poet noted of the operations of the Holy Spirit:

"Were books His constant residence indeed,
What must the millions do who cannot read?"⁷²

Wesley's concessions to popular "enthusiasm" were not merely tactical: he shared many of its assumptions. He believed in the need for continual openness and expectancy about the Holy Spirit. While stressing the necessity of attendance on the prescribed "means of grace" — such as public worship and the sacraments — he emphasised that God often worked outside them too, pouring his Spirit directly into the heart. He was receptive to spiritual phenomena which others saw as bizarre. In his belief in guidance by dreams, in his practice of spiritual healing and occasional

exorcism, Wesley showed a supernaturalism that brings him close to modern charismatic movements — and certainly brought him close to popular culture. His *Arminian Magazine* is full of extraordinary accounts of the occult — ghost riders in the sky, portents, apparitions, premonitions, providential judgements, escapes from death, miraculous healings — which could have come straight out of the almanac literature of the period.

His doctrine of conversion brought him in some ways close to popular religion.⁷³ Through his own evangelical conversion Wesley had stumbled, almost without realizing it, on keys to pastoral success among poor people. Two interrelated convictions proved to have unexpected pastoral utility. The first was the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The implication of this (when preached “experimentally” and not as a mere tenet) was clear to the poor. Acceptance by God was not dependent, as they had often been taught, on a previous life of so-called “good works”, which could easily be interpreted as a synonym for cultural respectability, and hence as seldom to be attained by those with no pretensions to be genteel. Poor people should never feel that they were excluded from the offer of grace, for acceptance by God was not dependent on antecedent good conduct but on present repentance; it was apprehended through simple faith in the merits of Christ. And Christ came not to those who believed that they had *earned* his grace, but to those who felt that they *needed* it. What was more, conversion could be — normally was — immediate. It could be felt, instantaneously, in the heart. Wesley offered his poor a presently experienced salvation that was within their reach; that could be not only instantly grasped but instantly recognized, by a self-evidencing “immediate consciousness”. Feeling was of course not the only test of conversion: the “direct witness” of the Spirit on the heart required subsequent confirmation by the “indirect witness” of a changed life, and must be evidenced by a command over outward sin. Nevertheless, grace could be immediately granted. And though it must be energetically sought, it was, paradoxically, always a gift: free, unconditional.⁷⁴

Wesley told the poor that in some ways the lowly and despised were closer to the Kingdom of Heaven than the “rich, the learned, the reputable, the moral men”. They had less to unlearn. Because of their poverty and ignorance and humility they were often less hindered by the fetters of self-righteousness which held many of their “bettters” back from repentance.⁷⁵ The attendance of Wesley’s preachers at public executions, like those at Tyburn, represented, as in a *tableau vivant*, the instant accessibility of grace to the most degraded and vulnerable, even at the last moments of life. To the modern criminal, shivering on the scaffold, salvation could still descend as freely as it did at Golgotha to the crucified

malefactor hanging beside Christ, to whom He had promised "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise". As the cart carried them to the gallows, criminals mouthed the words of Charles Wesley's *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors*

Turn then, my Lord, my God unknown,
Whom with my parting breath I own:
In death the kind conviction dart,
And cast a look — and break my heart.⁷⁶

In his relationship with the poor it is hard to see Wesley as the dutiful chaplain to the factory masters. This was certainly not his self-image. Rather romantically, he saw himself as in some ways a man unclassed. "I bear the rich," he remarked: "and love the poor".⁷⁷ In 1764 he told the Evangelical Lord Dartmouth abrasively "to speak a rough truth, I do not desire any intercourse with any persons of quality in England".⁷⁸ His approach to poor people was respectful, almost reverential. It was a leading idea of his that all great movements of spiritual renewal began among the poor and moved up the social scale, while much that was evil moved down from the "great ones" — arrogance, scepticism, conspicuous consumption.⁷⁹ He did not, like many economic writers, blame the poor for idleness: on the contrary, he compared their industriousness with the lethargy of the leisured classes.⁸⁰ Wesley saw in the beggar the awesome image of the suffering Christ. In a striking passage of one of his sermons he wrote "A poor wretch cries to me for an alms: I look, and see him covered with dirt and rags. But through these I see one that has an immortal spirit, made to know, and love, and dwell with God to eternity. I honour him for his Creator's sake. I see, through all these rags, that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ".⁸¹ He tried to re-sacralize the poor in an age in which moralists and economists often saw them only as a problem; as reluctant producers of labour, as a social threat, or at least a nuisance. For Wesley, the indigent were "poor members of Christ".⁸²

As a man reared in the age of Walpole, Wesley had no great hopes of the instrumentality of the state in dealing with poverty. Surprisingly perhaps, he had nothing to say about the Poor Laws. His concern was mostly with voluntary solutions; with philanthropic enterprises and above all with the Christian charity of groups and individuals. He believed that Christians might eliminate poverty if they returned to the spirit of communal sharing shown by the primitive Church — and, indeed, by some contemporaries, notably the Quakers.⁸³ He urged extreme generosity to the poor as a duty on his own people, and himself gave alms with almost Franciscan abandon, dispensing over a thousand pounds a year, derived partly from the huge sale of his own works.⁸⁴ On publishing his *History of England* he remarked

cheerfully, "I find that I am two hundred pounds in pocket, but as life is uncertain, I will take care to dispose of it before the end of the week".⁸⁵ Much of his alms seems to have been given out in sixpences or shillings to beggars, though he sometimes gave quite substantial sums to prevent a tradesman from going under.⁸⁶ This is hardly the stuff of which the capitalist ethic is easily constructed. Indeed, had the nation at large copied Wesley's personal practice, there might have been little capital accumulation and not much Industrial Revolution — but then his aim was the restoration of the *koinonia* of *Acts*, not the encouragement of headlong economic growth or personal affluence.⁸⁷ Wesley's view of charity looked backwards to the Middle Ages more than forwards to the New Poor Law or the Charity Organisation Society.

In giving alms, Wesley treated the poor with courtesy. "He never relieved poor people in the street", observed Samuel Bradburn, "but he either took off, or moved his hat to them when they thanked him".⁸⁸ He refused to discriminate sharply between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Human charity he saw as a paradigm of divine grace: just as grace was given freely to a world of sinners who were all equally *undeserving*, so too alms should be given freely to all, even the most repulsive of beggars. Human love must strive to copy a divine love which "soars above all . . . scanty bounds, embracing neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies; yea, not only the good and gentle, but also the foward, the evil and unthankful".⁸⁹

John Wesley touched society in a myriad ways. But if his life's work has a core, it is probably here, in the concern for outsiders — those outside the ministrations of the Church, those outside the comforts of a fully civilised existence: the shepherdless sheep, the "forlorn ones".⁹⁰ He was seized by the image of society as something like a great feast. Within, there is light, warmth, food: outside, in the darkness, looking in, squat the hungry and the cold. We have a description of one of his last sermons, preached only weeks before his death, using the familiar text of the Great Supper, in *Luke* 14. The Lord of the Feast is angry that many places are unfilled by the respectable guests whom he has summoned. He sends his messengers into the lanes of the city and the hedgerows of the countryside, to bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame. "And the servant said, Lord what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room". At this point in his exposition the aged Wesley's self-control cracked and — says the eyewitness — "he lifted up his hands and with tears flowing down his cheeks, repeated "and yet there is room; and yet there is room".⁹¹ Whether he is speaking to the secular philanthropist or to the Christian evangelist, this is probably the message Wesley would most have wished to convey to us today.

NOTES

- 1 J. Wesley, *Letters* ed. J. Telford, 8 vols. (London, 1931), VIII.44. Throughout these footnotes I have reluctantly avoided using the magnificent Bicentennial edition of Wesley's *Works*, since this is still incomplete. The most recent biography of Wesley, setting him in historical and historiographical context, is Henry Rack's impressive study, *Reasonable Enthusiast. John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London, 1989). I am most grateful to Dr. Rack and to Professor Richard Heitzenrater of Duke University for reading the text of this lecture and making salutary corrections.
- 2 H. Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (London, 1872), I.10-11.
- 3 T. Coke and H. Moore, *The Life of the Revd. J. Wesley* (London, 1792), p.511; J. Whitehead, *A Discourse at the Funeral of the Rev. J. Wesley* (London, 1791), p.1.
- 4 See Elizabeth Ritchie's account of Wesley's last days in J. Wesley, *Journal* ed. N. Curnock, 8 vols. (London, 1938), VIII.131-144; also Rack, op. cit. pp.532-3; L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Revd. J. Wesley*, 3 vols. (London, 1870). III.651-6.
- 5 *The Gentleman's Magazine* 61 (1791), p.284.
- 6 G. Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London, 1749), pt. III, pp.163-4; Wesley, *Journal*, VI.175.
- 7 Wesley, *Letters* VI.292; Tyerman, II.409.
- 8 The Williams portrait hangs in the Hall of Lincoln College, Oxford; the Romney in Christ Church, Oxford. Whether or not these are the originals remains to be definitely established, as there are other claimants.
- 9 e.g. M.A. Courtney, *Cornish Feasts and Folk Lore* (Penzance, 1891), p.99.
- 10 W. Jessop, *An Account of Methodism in Rossendale* (Manchester, 1880), pp.83, 166; *Wesley Historical Society Proceedings* 13 (1922) pp.64-5, 19 (1934-5) pp.27-28; J. Ward, *Methodism in Thirsk* (Thirsk, 1860), p.26.
- 11 J. Trapp, *The Nature, Folly, Sin and Danger of being Righteous overmuch*, 2 edn. (London, 1739), p.57.
- 12 T.B. Macaulay, *Works*, 12 vols. (London, 1898), IX.320-1.
- 13 J. Wesley, *Works*, 3 edn. ed. T. Jackson (London, 1872), VIII.310. This edition has been photographically reproduced by Zondervan and by Baker Book House (both Grand Rapids).
- 14 Wesley, *Journal*, II.216.
- 15 Wesley, *Letters*, II.77-8.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.137.
- 17 *Howell Harris's Visits to London*, ed. T. Beynon (Aberystwyth, 1960), p.251.
- 18 See F. Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London, 1970), p.87.
- 19 Coke and Moore, p.529.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.524; L. Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 3 edn. 2 vols. (London, 1902), II.410.
- 21 Wesley, *Journal*, IV.89-91; VI.66-71.

- 22 Wesley, *Works*, XIII.230 ("we sing swift . . . because it saves time"); Wesley, *Letters*, IV.222.
- 23 Wesley, *Works*, VI.130.
- 24 Wesley, *Letters*, III.387-8.
- 25 Wesley, *Journal*, IV.370; *Letters*, II.69; *Wesley Hist. Soc. Proc.*, 28 (1951), p.71.
- 26 Wesley, *Letters*, IV.70.
- 27 Whitehead, p.49. In 1745 Wesley got into trouble for infringing the copyright of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* and had to pay compensation; Wesley, *Journal*, III.162n.
- 28 Whitehead, p.49.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.47.
- 30 Coke and Moore, p.526.
- 31 V.H.H. Green, *John Wesley*, (London, 1964), p.127.
- 32 J. Byrom, *Journal and Remains*, Chetham Society 44 (1857), II(2), p.630.
- 33 Wesley, *Works*, VII.24.
- 34 J. Hampson, *Memoirs of The Revd. John Wesley*, 3 vols. (Sunderland, 1791), III.197-200.
- 35 Wesley, *Journal*, VI.35n.
- 36 Wesley, *Letters*, VI.375-6.
- 37 See J.D. Walsh, "John Wesley and the Community of Goods", in *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America, c.1750-c.1950*, ed. K.Robbins, *Studies in Church History*, Subsidia 7 (1990).
- 38 B.M. Jarboe, *John and Charles Wesley: a Bibliography*, American Theological Library Association Bibliography Series 22, (Metuchen and London, 1987), *passim*.
- 39 On the diverse strands in Wesley's theology, see the superb introduction by Albert Outler to the *Sermons* in the Bicentennial Edn. of *Works* (Oxford and Nashville, 1965-), I-IV. See too R.C. Monk, *John Wesley. His Puritan Heritage* (London, 1966). For Wesley as linguist see Hampson, III.174. For his translation of German hymns see J.L. Nuelson, *John Wesley and the German Hymn* (Eng. tr., Calverley, 1972); M. Schmidt, *John Wesley. A Theological Biography*, 2 vols. (London, 1962-73), I.166-8.
- 40 Wesley's use of Roman Catholic sources is examined in Jean Orcibal, "The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality", in R.E. Davies, A.R. George and E.G. Rupp eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 4 vols. (London, 1965-88), 1.81-111. See too the valuable essay by Eamon Duffy, "Wesley and the Counter-Reformation" in J. Garnett and Colin Matthew, *Revival and Religion since 1700* (London and Rio Grande, 1993). D. Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850* (London, 1984), pp.31-43 discusses the negative side of Wesley's view of the Roman Church.
- 41 *A Christian Library consisting of Extracts from, and Abridgements of . . . Practical Divinity*, 50 vols. (London, 1749-1755).
- 42 Wesley, *Works*, X.492.
- 43 J.H. Rigg, *The Relations of John Wesley and of Wesleyan Methodism to the Church of England* (London, 1868), p.6; Tyerman, I.148.
- 44 Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London, 1970), p.251. On the evidence of Wesley's revision of the Prayer Book and Articles, Baker suggests that he shifted away from early High Churchmanship towards "a somewhat low view of Church, Ministry and Sacraments" in his last years.

- 45 e.g. [L.P. Holden], *John Wesley in Company with High Churchmen. By an Old Methodist* (London, 1869); F. Hockin, *John Wesley and Modern Methodism* (London, 1877); G.W. Taylor, *John Wesley and the Anglo-Catholic Revival* (London, 1905). Rack, p.381ff., judiciously discusses some of these issues. For Wesley's sacramental theology see J.R. Parris, *John Wesley's Doctrine of the Sacraments* (London, 1963). For his view on celibacy see *Wesley's Thoughts on Marriage and a Single Life*, a shortened version of which can be found in *Works*, XI.456-463.
- 46 A. Toplady, *Works*, 6 vols. (London, 1794), V.331.
- 47 M. Arnold, *Complete Prose Works*, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor, 1960-77), X.11; Stephen, II.410.
- 48 Preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions* in *Works*, V.2.
- 49 A. Knox, *Remains*, 4 vols. (London, 1836-7), III.78, 137-8, 152.
- 50 Wesley, *Letters*, II.268.
- 51 A. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York, 1964), pp.9-10.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp.ix, 8ff, 119.
- 53 See Wesley, *Works*, XIII.482-7; XI.526-7. Wesley's fascination with the advance of the physical sciences was nuanced and ambivalent. It coexisted with anxiety lest "natural philosophy" encourage a reductionist, mechanistic vision of creation, and so promote scepticism. He insisted that scientific progress, properly considered, showed up the vastness and impenetrable mystery of existence and the insuperable limitations of human knowledge. Thus it underlined our need for the guidance of revelation. See, for example, the Preface to his excerpted collection of works on physico-theology, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation* (Bristol, 1763), and his sermon on "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge" in *Works*, VI.337ff.
- 54 Wesley, *Journal*, V.104.
- 55 *The Desideratum: or Electricity made Plain and Useful* (London, 1760), whose preface is reprinted in *Works*, XIV.241-4. See too A.W. Hill, *John Wesley among the Physicians* (London, 1958). There is a useful summary in H. Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire* (Stanford, 1990), pp.27-9.
- 56 Wesley's *Primitive Physic* went into many editions (at least 38 in Britain); see G.S. Rousseau, "John Wesley's Primitive Physic", *Harvard Library Bulletin* 16 (1968), p.242.
- 57 Wesley, *Works*, XI.406.
- 58 *Ibid.*, VI.490-1.
- 59 F.B. Dreyer, "Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley", *American Historical Review* 88 (1983); R.E. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville, 1984).
- 60 The subtitle of his *Doctrine of Original Sin* is *According to Scripture, Reason and Experience*; *Works*, IX.191. For Wesley on Tradition see Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville, 1991).
- 61 Orcibal, pp.109-110.
- 62 See Outler's stimulating article "John Wesley as Theologian — Then and Now", *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review: Methodist History. News Bulletin* July, 1974, p.79.
- 63 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1965), p.37.
- 64 [E. Gibson], *Observations upon the Conduct and Behaviour of a certain Sect* (London, n.d.), p.4.
- 65 *Wesley Hist. Soc. Proc.* 36 (1967), p.30.

- 66 Wesley, *Works*, VIII.239.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 251-2.
- 68 J.D. Walsh, "Religious Societies: Methodist and Evangelical 1738-1800", *Voluntary Religion*, ed. W.J. Shiels and D. Wood, *Studies in Church History* 23 (1986).
- 69 Wesley, *Works*, VIII.254. See D.L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville, 1985).
- 70 For the role of women in early Methodism see P.W. Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen and London, 1991).
- 71 See T. Mozley, *Reminiscences of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, 2 vols., 2 edn. (London, 1882), II.372.
- 72 *The Arminian Magazine* 4 (1781), p.227.
- 73 See J.D. Walsh, "Methodism and the Origins of English Speaking Evangelicalism" in M.A. Noll, D.W. Bebbington and G.A. Rawlyk eds., *Evangelicalism. Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and beyond* (New York and Oxford, 1994), pp.30-1.
- 74 See Wesley, *Works*, V; sermons X-XII for his doctrine of the "inward" and the "outward" witness of the Spirit in assurance; sermon VIII for power over outward sin as a necessary mark of justification; XXXVI-II for the linking of faith to holiness.
- 75 Wesley, *Works*, V.14-15; *Poetical Works of J. and C. Wesley*, 11 vols. (London, 1868-71), X.333, 467.
- 76 *Poetical Works*, VII.348.
- 77 Wesley, *Letters*, VIII.267.
- 78 *Ibid.*, IV.260.
- 79 Wesley, *Works*, VI.282-3; XI.183.
- 80 Wesley, *Journal*, IV.52.
- 81 Wesley, *Works*, VII.145-6. With a few alterations, the passage is taken from [J.-B. de Saint-Jure], *The Holy Life of Monsr. de Renty* (Eng. tr. by E.S., London, 1658). De Renty's example exerted a potent influence on Wesley's conception of "Christ's poor"; see Orcibal, *op.cit.* p.90; H. Bett, "A French Marquis and the Class Meeting", *Wesley Hist. Soc. Proc.* 18 (1931-2), pp.43-5; D.D. Wilson, "John Wesley, Gregory Lopez and the Marquis de Renty", *op.cit.* 35 (1966), pp.181-4.
- 82 Wesley, *Works*, VII.286.
- 83 *Ibid.*, VII.287-8.
- 84 S. Bradburn, *A Farther Account of the Rev. J. Wesley* (1791), p.18; see also Tyerman, III.615-6.
- 85 E.M. North, *Early Methodist Philanthropy* (New York, 1914), p.122n.
- 86 Wesley, *Letters*, VII.236-7.
- 87 Walsh, "Community of Goods", pp.35-6.
- 88 Bradburn, p.19.
- 89 Wesley, *Works*, X.68.
- 90 Wesley, *Works*, VII.435.
- 91 *Wesley Hist. Soc. Proc.* 26 (1947-8), p.79.

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